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ELEANOR RANCE AND MICHAEL SNAPE* 

Anglicans and Aviators: The First World War and the Forgotten Origins of Royal Air Force Chaplaincy

Nineteen-eighteen saw the formation of the world's first independent air force, and the inauguration of the first independent chaplaincy organisation devoted to military aviation. However, the neglected creation of the Chaplains' Branch of the Royal Air Force (RAF) towards the end of the First World War represents far more than just a minor footnote in the institutional history of Britain's armed forces. The circumstances of its creation, which occurred just as the German sociologist Max Weber was identifying scientific progress as driving the ineluctable "disenchantment of the world," not only belied this famous sociological maxim in the highly technological and supremely modern context of aerial warfare but also demonstrated the competence of Anglican chaplaincy methods and the resilience of British "Christendom" in the context of a war which is widely perceived as having exposed and exacerbated the weaknesses of both.

On 22 October 1918, and amidst one of their thrice-yearly meetings at Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, announced to his fellow bishops a new development concerning armed forces chaplaincy. Less than a month before the end of the First World War, around two thousand clergy of the Church of England were engaged as commissioned chaplains in the British Army and Royal Navy, the vast majority (nearly 90 per cent) in the Army Chaplains' Department.¹ With nineteen items to discuss, theirs was a crowded agenda, and Davidson's news was largely a matter of report. Speaking on the subject of "Religious Services In English Aerodromes," and in response to the Bishop of Chelmsford, John Watts Ditchfield, who had aired concerns about "the inadequate provision at

1. *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War. 1914–1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), 190. G. Taylor, *The Sea Chaplains* (Oxford: Oxford Illustrated Press, 1978), 360.

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present made for the spiritual needs of those serving in the Royal Air Force, particularly where the R.A.F. units were small and scattered,” Davidson revealed that he expected to hear “any day” that the Treasury had given its sanction for “the formation of a Chaplains Department for the Royal Air Force.” This, the Archbishop averred, would permit “full provision” to be made “for all R.A.F. units so far as England was concerned.” However, with the RAF barely six months old (it had been formed — with no sense of irony — on 1 April 1918), and with the war reaching its climax on the Western Front, there would be no organisational change in France and Belgium for the moment, and “[t]he Archbishop added that special arrangements had been made by which the Army Chaplains’ Department continued to be responsible for the Royal Air Force in France.”² The announcement of the Treasury’s willingness to fund the new chaplains’ department of the fledgling RAF came on 31 October — Halloween — and thereafter the work of creating the new organisation began apace.³

That November, and barely noticed amidst the momentous events surrounding the Armistice, an RAF pamphlet appeared under the title “Chaplains’ Department. Special Instructions for the Personal Guidance of Church of England Chaplains.” This four-page document dealt with issues of seniority, discipline, rank, uniform, facilities, and appurtenances, while also dispensing some essential pastoral advice for the Anglican RAF chaplain, a figure who would, given the Church of England’s great preponderance in Great Britain and its armed forces, predominate among the chaplains of the new organisation. Significantly, it began by stressing the chaplain’s duties, which (among his more obvious priestly functions) included the expectation of forging personal friendships with members of his flock and supporting any and all activities conducive to their welfare:

A Chaplain should be careful that nothing interferes with the carrying out of his duties as a Priest of the Church. He should aim at becoming the trusted friend of Officers and Men alike. ... Provided he regards the work as subsidiary to his real duties, he can give valuable assistance to any efforts made for furthering the social, moral, and physical well-being of Officers and Men.⁴

These instructions returned to the theme of friendship in a later section entitled “Position,” in which it was stated that: “The Chaplain should lay himself out to be the Spiritual Adviser and Friend of the Officers and Men in his Station. Accordingly he should carefully avoid using official means as an Officer where he can secure his ends unofficially as a Priest.” In the matter of saluting, for example, the chaplain should return the courtesy “promptly,” but should never (unlike other officers) report cases of where he had not been saluted, as “[h]e will make few mistakes in his dealings with

2. Lambeth Palace Library, Bishops’ Meetings 6, 1913–1918, fols. 333, 347.

3. Bishops’ Meetings 6, fol. 347.

4. The National Archives, AIR 10/137.

Officers and Men if he remembers that he is a Priest first and an Officer second.”⁵

Although (to those familiar with chaplaincy methods) this advice might seem to have echoed the Navy’s maxim that the seagoing chaplain should be regarded as “a friend and adviser by all on board,”⁶ this article will show that, despite the cultural hybridity of the RAF, with its roots in both the British Army and the Royal Navy, this informal approach was guided more by the practical experience of army chaplains on the airfields of France and Belgium than by any inherited wisdom received from the Royal Navy, whose practical contribution to the development of aviation chaplaincy on the Western Front was conspicuously absent. Instead, these deceptively simple instructions encapsulated wisdom that had been accumulated by army chaplains over four years of war, most notably through a dedicated ministry to the fliers and ground crew of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), which had begun as recently as 1917. Nevertheless, the roots and development of this new ministry to military aviators from Britain and the British Empire, and to the highly skilled mechanics who supported them in the world’s first independent air force, has gone virtually unnoticed in the burgeoning literature on British military chaplaincy and soldiers’ religion during the First World War.⁷ However, it deserves to be much better known for two very significant reasons: first of all, its emergence belies the image of general incompetence that has dogged depictions of Anglican chaplaincy in the First World War, especially since 1929 when Robert Graves first made his malicious allegations of Anglican chaplains distributing cigarettes in the trenches before disappearing to the rear.⁸ Secondly, its development sheds considerable light on the supposed secularisation of British society widely associated with the First World War. In particular, it contradicts Max Weber’s contemporary and much-vaunted correlation of technological progress with the decline of religious belief; it throws into question hoary assumptions about the fatal effects of war on the faith of war-weary combatants; and, finally, it demonstrates the ability of the ecclesiastical and political institutions that underpinned British “Christendom” (defined by Hugh McLeod as “a social order in which,

5. AIR 10/137.

6. *The King’s Regulations and Admiralty Instructions* (London: HMSO, 1913), I, 216; *Reports of the Church Congress* (1903), 389.

7. The notable exception is Kevin Hart’s brief reflection, “Chaplaincy Vision - some things never in change” in *Sacred Presence & Ethical Challenge: Six reflective essays on the Church’s Chaplaincy response to World War I*, ed. R. Jones (London: Methodist Church, 2014), 18–27. Otherwise, see E. Madigan, *Faith under Fire: Anglican Army Chaplains and the Great War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); R. Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); M. Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005); M. Snape, *The Royal Army Chaplains’ Department, 1796–1953: Clergy under Fire* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008); M. Snape and E. Madigan, eds., *The Clergy in Khaki: New Perspectives on British Army Chaplaincy in the First World War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); P. Howson, *Muddling Through: The Organisation of British Army Chaplaincy in World War One* (Solihull: Helion, 2013).

8. M. Snape, “Church of England Army Chaplains in the First World War: Goodbye to ‘Goodbye to All That’,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62 (2011): 318–45.

regardless of individual belief, Christian language, rites, moral teachings, and personnel were part of the taken-for-granted environment”⁹ to adjust to the religious challenges posed by the war. Marking, in part, the centenary of the creation of the RAF’s Chaplains’ Branch, which (like the RAF itself) was the first of its kind in the armed forces of the world, this article traces the origins, evolution, and nature of RAF chaplaincy and assesses its wider significance for the capacity and reputation of Anglican chaplaincy, for the religious outlook of exceptionally vulnerable combatants in a highly technological war, and for the enduringly religious nature and temper of British society towards the end of the First World War.

First, however, it is important to emphasise the sheer novelty of aviation — military or otherwise — in 1914. The Wright brothers had made their pioneering flight of a powered, heavier-than-air aircraft barely a decade earlier, whereas Louis Blériot had made his daring run across the English Channel (a feat that would be repeated many thousands of times during the First World War) in July 1909. The first flight to be made in England by a British pilot had occurred just two months earlier.¹⁰ Among the churches of Great Britain, therefore, the practical implications of powered flight were still being digested. In February 1914, the clergy of the Yorkshire coastal resort of Bridlington approached their local council to raise concerns that the commercial flying displays scheduled for the coming summer would include flying on Sunday, a move which prompted their bid to protect “young people from the moral perils of Sabbath desecration.”¹¹ Given the abiding strength of traditional Christian cosmologies, some were mistrustful of flying altogether; as one woman complained, “I don’t think they ought to be allowed to make them things to go up there prying into the Almighty’s private affairs.”¹² Much as individuals struggled to negotiate the implications of aviation for the pre-war social and religious order, after war broke out on 4 August 1914 it took some time for the British churches, and their chaplains especially, to respond to the religious and pastoral needs arising from the gruesome and developing novelty that was aerial warfare.

Whereas the Italians had experimented with aerial bombing in Libya the previous year, on the formation of the RFC in April 1912, the expectation was that its work would be that of aerial reconnaissance.¹³ In this role, it absorbed and extended the functions already performed by the aircraft and observation balloons of the recently formed Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers.¹⁴ Given the multifarious technical demands of its role, the air

9. H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 265.

10. K. Rose, “John Theodore Cuthbert Moore-Brabazon,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter *ODNB*] (Oxford: OUP, 2011), <https://doi.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/32018>.

11. *Flight*, 7 February 1914, 142.

12. P. Cooksley, *Royal Flying Corps Handbook 1914–18* (Stroud: Sutton, 2007), 177.

13. W. Raleigh, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922–37), I, 8–9, 213.

14. R. Barker, *The Royal Flying Corps in France: From Mons to the Somme* (London: Constable, 1995), 11.

mechanics of the RFC were recruited from military and civilian tradesmen ranging from electricians and coppersmiths to joiners, wheelwrights, and sailmakers.¹⁵ Likewise, and given the expense and novelty of aviation as a pursuit, the assumption was that pilots would join the Flying Corps as qualified personnel — as was the case with the doctors, clergy, and veterinaries of the British Army — duly certified by the Royal Aero Club.¹⁶ Having already spent the early summer of 1914 in a so-called concentration camp at Netheravon in Wiltshire in order to train and test its mobilisation procedures,¹⁷ on the outbreak of war on 4 August just over two thousand men of the Flying Corps were ready to deploy to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in four squadrons comprising just sixty-six aircraft.¹⁸ Surviving the BEF's subsequent retreat from the Belgian town of Mons to the Île-de-France (during which mechanics slept beneath their aircraft, and pilots often had to fly to new and improvised aerodromes as dusk fell),¹⁹ the stabilisation of the Western Front between the North Sea and the Swiss border that autumn showed that aircraft now had “an undreamed-of importance” in terms of their reconnaissance and observation role in static, trench-bound warfare.²⁰ Britain's Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, consequently encouraged the rapid expansion of the RFC.²¹ Such was its growth that, by the end of 1917, the last calendar year of its existence, the Flying Corps numbered over fifteen thousand officers and almost one hundred thousand other ranks, with fifty-eight squadrons and over nine hundred serviceable aircraft operating in France and Italy alone.²² The technical and logistical demands of military aviation were such that in the autumn of 1917 it was estimated that forty-seven men were required to maintain a single aeroplane at the front.²³

Although spectacular, such growth was a mixed blessing for the RFC, which had deployed almost all of its men and machines to France in August 1914, leaving little in the way of experience or equipment with which to train its new recruits.²⁴ Furthermore, the multifarious disruptions and demands of the war meant that the production of new and improved aircraft designs was severely hampered.²⁵ As the war lengthened and deepened, the need for more squadrons and the multiplication of roles posed ever greater challenges. By November 1918, the duties of the British military aviator had grown from basic reconnaissance to directing artillery fire by wireless, the interception of

15. Raleigh, 215.

16. Barker, 11.

17. Raleigh, 259; Cooksley, 15.

18. *Statistics*, 495.

19. Barker, 34–35, 41, 47; Raleigh, 305, 323.

20. W. Murray, *War in the Air 1914–45* (London: Cassell, 2002), 36.

21. Murray, 36; Barker, 18; Raleigh, 431–33.

22. *Statistics*, 499, 503.

23. H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922–37), VI, 28 note 2.

24. *Statistics*, 495; Barker, 66; Raleigh, 430.

25. H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922–37), III, 253–56; V, 28–30.

enemy aircraft, tactical strafing, strategic bombing, and even dropping agents and carrier pigeons behind German lines.²⁶ Faced by enormous technical and logistical challenges, to say nothing of skilled and determined German opposition, this expansion and diversification saw an exponential rise in casualties. More than fourteen thousand British pilots died in the First World War,²⁷ and in “Bloody April” 1917 the average life expectancy of rookie pilots in France fell to just seventeen days.²⁸ Such were levels of attrition that, of almost 1,500 RFC pilots sent to France from July to December 1917, just 11 per cent were still there on 1 November 1918, whereas 18 per cent had been killed, and 20 per cent were missing.²⁹ Given the rudimentary state of aircraft design, the manifold hazards of flight, and the notable absence of parachutes, even routine dangers to aircrew were formidable, and the RFC actually lost more pilots in training than it did to enemy action.³⁰ Freak accidents could claim the lives of even the most accomplished fliers, and James McCudden, one of the greatest British “aces” of the war, died in July 1918 when a brand new S.E.5a he was flying (one of the best British aircraft of the war) experienced a sudden engine failure.³¹ Whereas schemes were devised that sought to ensure long and comprehensive training regimes,³² in practice the need for aircrew resulted in spells when pilots arrived at the front with barely the skills to fly their own (often inferior) aircraft, and little or no tactical understanding of aerial warfare. Inevitably, they were very likely to become casualties, although some squadrons tried hard to enhance their rudimentary knowledge before pitching them into action.³³

It must, however, be noted that the RFC was not the only progenitor of the RAF. Sharing the distinction of being “virtually created from nothing” between 1914 and 1918 was the smaller Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).³⁴ Originally, the Flying Corps had comprised a military wing and a naval wing, which were served by a single Central Flying School at Upavon in Wiltshire, but inter-service politics and developments in naval aviation resulted in the Admiralty’s creation of the independent RNAS in July 1914. On the outbreak of war, this comprised over seven hundred naval ratings and a motley collection of around a hundred aircraft, airships, and balloons. However, and like the larger Flying Corps, the RNAS saw spectacular growth in the first years of the war. By the end of 1917, it comprised more than forty thousand ratings,³⁵ and the variety of roles it undertook — ranging from home defence

26. Barker, 73, 128–137; J. Levine, *Fighter Heroes of WWI* (London: Collins, 2009), 140.

27. Levine, 63.

28. Levine, 253.

29. Murray, 23–24.

30. Levine, 63.

31. “World War One: Mysterious deaths of the English [sic] flying aces,” <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-29688945> (accessed 17 June 2020).

32. I. Beckett, T. Bowman and M. Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 77–78; Jones, *War in the Air*, III, 294–99.

33. Barker, 123, 220–21.

34. P. Kennedy, “Britain in the First World War” in *Military Effectiveness*, ed. A. R. Millett and W. Murray (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), I, 35.

35. B. Lavery, *Able Seamen: The Lower Deck of the Royal Navy 1850–1939* (London: Conway, 2011), 227.

to anti-submarine patrols — exceeded that of the RFC. By that point, its aircraft and dirigibles were operating from bases as far afield as Flanders and East Africa, and even from dedicated seaplane carriers such as HMS *Engadine* and HMS *Campania*.³⁶

Given the RFC's original expectation that pilots qualify at their own expense, an expectation that survived until the end of 1914,³⁷ its first generation of pilots was inevitably drawn from Britain's wealthier classes. They were even routinely asked on their application to join the Corps: "Do you ride?"³⁸ High jinks in the mess, their boisterous behaviour on "dud" flying days, and the extreme youth of many pilots has done much to perpetuate a popular image of the contemporary British pilot as an aeronautical public school boy. However, and apart from the Flying Corps' small and controversial caste of sergeant pilots,³⁹ huge expansion and high casualty rates ensured that even its pilot officers came to represent a much broader social mix.⁴⁰ Whereas Germany's leading fighter ace, Manfred von Richthofen, the "Red Baron," was a Prussian aristocrat and former cavalry officer, Edward ("Mick") Mannock, his British counterpart, was the son of an army non-commissioned officer (the hopelessly delinquent Edward Mannock — or Corringham — who later sold his son's posthumous Victoria Cross for £5) and began his wartime career as a sergeant in the transport section of the Royal Army Medical Corps.⁴¹ Although he earnestly wished that he "had had the advantage of a public school," Mannock's mentor, James McCudden, was the son of a very different soldier and father (the highly respectable Warrant Officer William H. McCudden of the Royal Engineers) and began his military career at the age of fifteen as a bugler in the same Corps.⁴² Ultimately, what came to define the pilots of the RFC was not a particular social background but their shared attitudes and experiences in the face of common dangers. Indeed, and although rooted in the pre-war culture of the Royal Navy, even the fliers of the RNAS emerged from the war as "a new breed," much less constrained by the notorious social conservatism of the Senior Service.⁴³

Whatever their social or geographical origins, the duties of RFC pilots and observers were, at best, uncomfortable and time-consuming, and the combat stresses they faced were immense — especially the fear of burning to death in their highly inflammable aircraft (the pistol Mannock carried in his cockpit

36. M. Farquharson-Roberts, *A History of the Royal Navy: World War I* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 136–150.

37. Levine, 65.

38. Barker, 21.

39. I. Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs: The Short and Heroic Lives of the Young Aviators Who Fought and Died in the First World War* (London: Phoenix, 2013), 190–91.

40. C. Bowyer, *For Valour: The Air VCs* (London: Grub Street, 1992), 80.

41. D. Gunby, "Edward (Mick) Mannock," *ODNB* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), <https://doi.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/61823>.

42. D. Gunby, "James Thomas Byford McCudden," *ODNB* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), <https://doi.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/34694>.

43. Lavery, 229.

was intended for himself).⁴⁴ And this was especially so for the pilots of single-seater fighters (or “scouts” in British parlance) who, without the reassurance of a radio or even a parachute, flew, fought, and died alone. As the Welsh wartime ace Ira Jones (himself the son of “a poor working-class family”)⁴⁵ summarised their predicament:

While setting off on offensive patrol there were at least ten possible reasons why a pilot knew he might not return; they were:

Being killed

Being wounded and losing consciousness

The machine being set on fire

The machine breaking up as the result of enemy fire

Losing control due to broken controls

Engine put out of action by enemy fire

Engine failure due to technical defects

Machine forced to land due to gun stoppage and simultaneous attack by numerous enemies

Shortage of petrol

Losing his way owing to incorrect compass or bad weather⁴⁶

Still, the fact that they could “come home” from their war to airfields well behind the front line meant that the aircrew of the RFC usually enjoyed a degree of comfort not vouchsafed to those in the trenches, and life in the officers’ mess could at times resemble a permanent house party. There was certainly much to be gained from the warmth and camaraderie of such an existence. McCudden wrote that an hour of music in the mess was enough to raise his spirits,⁴⁷ whereas others found relief in the often macabre humour of shared songs and jokes. There were, of course, less salubrious distractions to be found in surrounding towns and villages, and the morals of the RFC were subjected to considerable scrutiny. Neville Talbot, the originator of Talbot House, a legendary Anglican soldiers’ hostel in Poperinghe, near Ypres, and assistant chaplain general (ACG) of Fifth Army for much of the war, admitted:

I got v. alarmed by reports of immorality in [the] RFC. Of course if you are a pilot you have the idea that you are “a bit of a lad” [and] it is a reckless profession. Also a great deal of the frail feminine attitude of girls towards dashing cavalry subalterns ... has been transferred to our amazing flying children. ... Yet given the right man they have welcomed a chaplain right with the squadrons — & such chaplains have been reassuring to me about their morals — on the whole.⁴⁸

However, much of this lifestyle was less emblematic of rampant hedonism than symptomatic of the inherent terrors and tensions of aerial combat. As Williamson Murray has observed, “In their messes rugby scrums, drunken

44. I. Jones, *King of Air Fighters* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1934), 199.

45. Mackersey, 275.

46. Jones, *King*, 99.

47. J. McCudden, *Flying Fury* (London: Hamilton, 1930), 151.

48. Nottinghamshire Archives, Papers of Bishop Neville Talbot of Southwell, DD 1332/145.

brawls and idle chatter at times removed the omnipresence of death's icy fingers."⁴⁹ Writing in his personal diary in May 1917, Mannock, who battled with his nerves throughout his wartime career, reflected in his staccato style: "Good. Still alive. ... Had two glorious days of 'dud' weather — which means no work for us. This morning it threatens to be fine — worse luck. Had quite a good time during the last three days ... although I think I took a little too much champagne."⁵⁰

But, besides the bottle or the brothel, the desperate need for diversion could result in other, more wholesome distractions. Albert Ball, for example, hailed as "the RFC's first really great ace,"⁵¹ conjured his own corner of normality by building a hut with a vegetable garden, which he tended daily.⁵² He also wandered around his retreat, playing the violin.⁵³ However, and given that airfields were seldom large enough to merit the rarity of a Y.M.C.A. officers' club (which were, in any case, controversially teetotal), immediate support for the young aviators of the RFC rested on the shoulders of their commanding officers and chaplains. The practical steps taken by the former could be ambitious, extending in 41 Squadron RFC to the construction of a skating rink in a spare aircraft hangar, which became the site of roller skating, badminton, and even rugby.⁵⁴ If not always co-ordinated — and Archbishop Davidson noted from his own visits of aerodromes that "nearly everything depended on the attitude taken by the Commanding Officer"⁵⁵ — the interest and efforts of senior officers and chaplains were geared to the same end of helping fliers to relax and recuperate, and the comforts of religion were very much part of this improvised web of support. In March 1916, Ball wrote to his parents: "I have only just been told that it is Sunday; we cannot tell one day from another out here. Oh, I would just love to go to church today; however, that will come later."⁵⁶ And such feelings were not unique to him. During a 1930 "Pilgrimage of Padres" to the former Western Front, Neville Talbot mentioned the thirty-mile journey from Dunkirk to Poperinghe, noting that "The last time I did it was in a Lancia Car driven by a Bo'sun & with some Naval Airmen who extricated me from Pop in order to take services for them (they had been neglected). I have never been driven so fast."⁵⁷

However, such demand for religious ministrations flies in the face of conventional wisdom, both sociological and historical. Ironically, and as the

49. Murray, 24.

50. F. Oughton, ed., *The Personal Diary of Major Edward 'Mick' Mannock* (London: Neville Spearman, 1966), 85.

51. C. Shores, *British and Empire Aces of World War I* (Oxford: Osprey, 2001), 63.

52. W. Alwyn and S. Briscoe, *Captain Ball, V.C.* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1918), 101, 157, 163.

53. D. Jordan, "War in the Air: The Fighter Pilot," in *The Great World War, 1914–1945, Lightning Strikes Twice*, vol. 1, ed. P. Liddle, J. Bourne, and I. R. Whitehead (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 94; P. Liddle, *The Airman's War 1914–1918* (Poole: Blandford, 1987), 48.

54. Levine, 186–87.

55. Bishops' Meetings 6, 1913–1918, fol. 347.

56. Alwyn and Briscoe, 125.

57. Papers of Bishop Neville Talbot, DD 118/198.

Church of England increased its ministry to military aviators in 1917 and 1918, the German sociologist Max Weber was propounding his theory of the growing redundancy of religion in advanced, technological societies. As Weber put it in his famous address on “Science as a Vocation” at Munich University: “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’.” For the person who could not face reality “like a man,” there was “an intellectual sacrifice” to be made — and “[t]he arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. After all, they do not make it hard for him.”⁵⁸ Seldom has an academic statement been more condescending or inaccurate. As Owen Davies has recently demonstrated in a sweeping international study, amidst the most technologically sophisticated war yet fought, tens of millions of Europeans had discovered just how random and ungovernable the effects of industrialised warfare actually were — a fact that led to a recrudescence and even explosion of “supernatural beliefs and practices.”⁵⁹ If, under these circumstances, Weber’s equation of scientific progress with “the disenchantment of the world” was little more than a scholarly conceit, historians’ assumptions as to the fundamental godlessness of roistering aviators (characterised as “free thinkers and individualists, innovators and risk-takers”)⁶⁰ also needs to be revised. Echoing an earlier verdict reached by Alan Clark in his 1970s potboiler *Aces High*, and citing a former pilot who had lost his faith, in 1987 Peter Liddle contended that British aviators “seemed to be a secular lot.”⁶¹ However, such conclusions are clearly open to question. For example, the historic link between Anglican clergy families and the British officer corps proved an enduring feature of the conflict. Consequently, Richard Ussher’s incomplete but highly suggestive *Roll of the Sons and Daughters of the Anglican Church Clergy* listed more than sixty individuals who had died while serving in the “RAF,” a category that included the RFC, although apparently not the RNAS.⁶² Among Britain’s aviators was at least one Anglican clergyman, Lieutenant John Herbert Fitzherbert Adams, curate of St. John’s, Newfoundland, mortally wounded in October 1917 while serving as an observer in 20 Squadron RFC.⁶³ Although Adams was one of scores of forgotten Anglican clergy who served as combatants in the First World War, the fliers of the RFC also included at least

58. H. H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills, and B. Turner, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Hoboken: Routledge, 2013), 155.

59. O. Davies, *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination, and Faith during the First World War* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), v-vi, 232.

60. Levine, 185.

61. Liddle, 121.

62. R. Ussher, *Roll of the Sons and Daughters of the Anglican Church Clergy Throughout the World, and of the Naval and Military Chaplains of the Same, Who Gave Their Lives in the Great War, 1914–1918* (London: English Crafts and Monumental Society, n.d.), 14; Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/4003937/dearmer-christopher/> (accessed 17 June 2020).

63. <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2002077/adams-john-percy-fitzherbert/> (accessed 17 June 2020); <http://www.lijssentheoek.be/en/address/11916/-john-percy-fitzherbert-adams.html> 2020 (accessed 17 June 2020).

one future bishop, Maurice Harland, who transferred from the Royal Field Artillery to the Flying Corps in 1916. Dubbed in later life “the Flying Bishop” for his First World War service, Harland became Bishop of Lincoln and then Bishop of Durham, holding two of the most important sees in the Church of England.⁶⁴ Likewise, the RNAS produced another prominent bishop of the Church of England in William Anderson, successively bishop of Croydon, Portsmouth and Salisbury, who earned the Distinguished Service Cross for sinking a German submarine while serving in flying boats based in the Scilly Isles.⁶⁵

Significantly, a more recent study of British First World War aviators by Ian Mackersey has concluded that British pilots usually “maintained a dogged belief in the deity, fatalistically convinced that their fate lay entirely in His hands.”⁶⁶ Although the prevalence of a supernaturalist worldview was also evidenced by a widespread attachment to talismans, a tendency typical of the wartime generation,⁶⁷ Mackersey’s conclusion seems much more in line with his subjects’ backgrounds in the believing society that was Edwardian Britain, where avowed atheism or even agnosticism was exceptionally rare.⁶⁸ In the absence of statistics, there is plenty of qualitative evidence to support Mackersey’s conclusion, not least from the careers of Britain’s most celebrated fighter pilots. Of his reaction to shooting down the first zeppelin over Britain in September 1916, William Leefe Robinson wrote to his parents:

I did what I do not think many people would think I would do, and that was I thanked God with all my heart. You know darling old mother and father I’m not what is popularly known as a religious person, but on an occasion such as that one must realise a little how one does trust in providence.⁶⁹

If Robinson thus acknowledged “that supreme power that rules and guides our destinies,”⁷⁰ James McCudden (a Roman Catholic) remembered of a near fatal incident over the Somme that November: “I got out of the machine and thanked God for my salvation.”⁷¹ Albert Ball also shared this sense of divine oversight, writing “I put all my trust in God, that is why I feel safe no matter in what mess I get.”⁷² In May 1917, after escaping an aerial collision, Ball told his squadron’s returning officer: “God is very good to me. God must have me in His keeping. I was certain that he meant to ram me.”⁷³ Finally, later that summer, Arthur Rhys Davids wrote to a relative:

64. *The Grantham Journal*, 29 March 1956, 1.

65. *The Times*, 7 March 1972, 16.

66. Mackersey, 197.

67. Davies, Chapter 5, especially 144.

68. C. Field, “‘The Faith Society’? Quantifying Religious Belonging in Edwardian Britain, 1901–1914,” *Journal of Religious History*, 37 (2013), 39–63.

69. Levine, 288.

70. Levine, 288.

71. McCudden, 114.

72. R. Kiernan, *Captain Albert Ball, V.C.* (London: John Hamilton, 1933), 78.

73. N. Steel and P. Hart, *Tumult in the Clouds: The British Experience of War in the Air, 1914–1918* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 213.

I love what you say about the Great Presence always helping me. But I am quite happy to think that if I am going to do any good in this place the good God will see me through, and if not, well I do not mind going to rest at once.⁷⁴

No major study has been made of the work of army chaplains attached to the RFC, or of Royal Navy chaplains who ministered to the RNAS, and no definitive list survives of chaplains assigned to this specialised ministry. However, and besides some illuminating portraits of Bernard Keymer, to which we will shortly turn, the letters of Pat Leonard and Richard Dugdale, both of the Army Chaplains' Department, yield some exceptional insights into the nature of chaplaincy to British aviators in this period.⁷⁵ Significantly, RFC chaplaincy did not emerge as a distinct specialism until early 1917, when Bernard Keymer, formerly vicar of the Hampshire parish of Eastleigh, was assigned to the RFC by Harry Blackburne, the dynamic and far-sighted assistant chaplain general (or ACG) of First Army.⁷⁶ This is not to say that the religious needs of the Corps had been neglected prior to that, however. According to army custom and regulation, RFC personnel were expected to attend Church Parade,⁷⁷ but under active service conditions this pattern of regular and enforced church attendance could easily break down. In his letters to his parents, Ball spoke frequently of his desire to go to church, and even attended after a full day's flying while in training.⁷⁸ Once in France, however, his attendance became more sporadic, even though he continued to express his faith in his personal correspondence.⁷⁹ Although such professions could have been partly for his parents' benefit,⁸⁰ they are easily reconciled with a young man whose courtship was characterised by a decorous piety,⁸¹ and who once averred: "Don't you trouble about me being afraid to acknowledge God before people. I shall never neglect that duty."⁸² The fact that Ball made little mention of attending services once in France can be easily explained: for RFC personnel, no less than for their colleagues in the trenches, Sunday could never be treated as a day of worship, still less a day of rest. Furthermore, RFC airfields were small, scattered, and often isolated, whereas France and Belgium were overwhelmingly Catholic countries where, when they were without chaplains or facilities of their own, Protestant Britons could not be readily catered for.

Even before 1917, the Army Chaplains' Department had sought to provide for the RFC on the Western Front, and Talbot was not the only army

74. Mackersey, 197.

75. P. Leonard, *The Fighting Padre* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010); Documents and Sound Sections of the Imperial War Museums, The Papers of Reverend R. W. Dugdale, "R. W. Dugdale Letters, 1915–1918," Documents 13312.

76. H. Blackburne, *This Also Happened on the Western Front* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932), 127; Mackersey, 197.

77. *The Musical Times*, 1 March 1918, 113.

78. Alwyn and Briscoe, 41, 54, 62, 70, 79, 85.

79. Alwyn and Briscoe, 107, 179, 182, 233, 247.

80. Alwyn and Briscoe, 181.

81. Kiernan, 123–125.

82. Kiernan, 78.

chaplain called upon to take services for the RNAS.⁸³ Like other small units dispersed behind the lines, RFC squadrons were usually the responsibility of the nearest chaplain. Consequently, those attached to casualty clearing stations, the field hospitals of their day, would often assume this rear area ministry, as indicated in a letter written in 1916 by S. F. Leighton Green to his parishioners in Norwich:

A Casualty Clearing Station Chaplain has a fixed anchorage, but, fortunately, he is not confined to home waters. He is told to roam at large in search of troops who have no Chaplain. ... Consequently I have always had a Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps to look after.⁸⁴

Although Green juggled his dual responsibilities to 22 Casualty Clearing Station and to the 150 officers and men of 18 Squadron RFC,⁸⁵ the religious needs of the Flying Corps and other ancillary units were prioritised in 1916 by the Anglican Deputy Chaplain-General, Bishop Llewellyn H. Gwynne, and by his Assistant Chaplains General. At their inaugural conference that April, an event which approximated to a diocesan conference in the civilian Church, these senior Anglican chaplains discussed "Services in the Flying Corps," although no record of their deliberations appears to have survived.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, and after a lengthy hiatus marked by the Battle of the Somme, progress was made in a further conference that November. Helped by increased recruitment of chaplains at home and by redeployments on the Western Front, it was decided that special provision would be made for "corps troops" such as the RFC. Hence, it was recommended that a dedicated chaplain should be assigned to work with the Flying Corps in each of the BEF's five army areas.⁸⁷ What the precise postings were is unclear, but it seems that a single chaplain was sent to all six brigades of the RFC in France, their appearance indistinguishable from that of their fellow army chaplains save for a dark-blue, light-blue and red RFC brassard.⁸⁸

Although little is known of most of these pioneers, two, namely Richard Dugdale and Pat Leonard, described their work at length in personal correspondence. Born in 1889, both were in their late twenties when posted to the Flying Corps. Like Bernard Keymer, an older man, they had previously served with infantry brigades in the trenches — a fact which implies that their lot was not expected to be easy. Significantly, all three had been decorated, Leonard with the Distinguished Service Order, and Keymer and Dugdale with the Military Cross. These decorations no doubt bestowed important leverage in their ministries to young and highly vulnerable fliers whose combat missions as non-combatants they could not share. Despite its practical challenges, there were distinct advantages to their new role, with

83. Blackburne, 73.

84. S. McLaren, ed., *Somewhere in Flanders: Letters of a Norfolk Padre in the Great War* (Norfolk: Larks Press, 2005), 58.

85. McLaren, 58.

86. Museum of Army Chaplaincy, *Blackburne Papers. Proceedings of ACGs Conferences; 25 Apr 1916*.

87. "Proceedings," 28 November 1916.

88. Hart, "Chaplaincy Vision," 22; Cooksley, 11.

Leonard observing on more than one occasion that he was now safely out of harm's way: "The war can offer no nicer billet I imagine than that of a non-flying officer with the Flying Corps. The halo of their glory shines upon you, and for all you know of dangers or discomfort you might as well be at home."⁸⁹ Likewise, when he was re-posted back to an infantry brigade in June 1918, Dugdale wrote wistfully:

If & when the R.A.F. send for me again I think I shall go to them rather willingly — I sometimes think they want fresher men for the infantry now: who have seen less war than the old stagers [Dugdale was only 28]. But that thought may be (and probably is) due to laziness & a natural desire to get away from the line.⁹⁰

Such sentiments were, indeed, a far cry from the spirit in which he had embarked on his work with the Flying Corps a year earlier, for then both he and Leonard had voiced unease at the novelty and scale of their new assignments. Dugdale was posted to the RFC by Neville Talbot, ACG of Fifth Army, in July 1917, and Leonard followed four months later.⁹¹ Whereas Leonard had been thrilled by the spectacle of aerial dogfights,⁹² Dugdale's initial response was unenthusiastic, fretting "I was rather sorry in many ways. ... It is a difficult job [and] one sighs for Battalion life."⁹³ The nature of the chaplain's day-to-day role on a busy airfield was, of course, unclear, and it called for a good deal of experimentation and reflection, trial and error. Whereas Leonard acknowledged that everyone was polite and cheerful,⁹⁴ neither he nor Dugdale could readily grasp what was required of them. Responsible for four different squadrons based at Proven and La Lorie, Leonard confessed:

There doesn't appear to be such a need or scope for a Padre as in the Infantry — or rather I should say work isn't quite so easy to find, and people continually ask me what I do all day. ... I find it rather harder to get in touch with the men. They are always busy and being specialists are a good deal scattered plying their various trades. Unfortunately there are no trenches to wander around where men are only too ready to have a crack to fill up a slack half hour.⁹⁵

Dugdale echoed this ambivalence after a morning playing tennis:

It is very difficult to know what one can do for these RFC people as Chaplain. Their work is so disjointed — & one can practically never see anything of the men at all: they of course are nearly all mechanics. I hope to be able to run a cinema for them and take it round from squadron to squadron.⁹⁶

Because RFC brigades normally comprised two or more wings, each consisting of two or more squadrons, their chaplains were usually responsible

89. Leonard, 190.

90. Dugdale, 193.

91. Dugdale, 128; Leonard, 178, 187.

92. Leonard, 33.

93. Dugdale, 129.

94. Leonard, 179.

95. Leonard, 180.

96. Dugdale, 131.

for several squadrons spread across a wide area.⁹⁷ Initially, Dugdale was expected to take charge of “all the Flying people” in Fifth Army, but he negotiated this down to a single wing of six squadrons, which he still gloomily predicted “will take all one’s time to get round.”⁹⁸ By early August 1917, and now with a further squadron to take care of, Dugdale’s Sunday rounds involved a sixty-four mile circuit in an RFC lorry, having relinquished his motorcycle due to the wretched state of the roads.⁹⁹ Naturally, both chaplains sought to overcome these challenges by adopting a semi-itinerant lifestyle: Dugdale elected to live at the headquarters of his wing,¹⁰⁰ whereas Leonard attached himself to one squadron and travelled to the others for a few days in turn.¹⁰¹ However, this solution was not entirely satisfactory because Leonard soon realised something: “In my own Squadron I am now quite at home. ... In my other three Squadrons, as yet I am a carefully and punctiliously treated guest and stranger.”¹⁰² A quicker and increasingly common expedient was hitching a “fly” from one airfield to another, an offer Dugdale accepted after — whether from nerves or scruples — originally declining a ride in a two-seater Bristol fighter.¹⁰³

Despite early misgivings, there was plenty of work to be done with the RFC. In common with their fellow Anglican Army chaplains, both Leonard and Dugdale chafed at the time they had to devote to recreational activities. As Geoffrey Gordon, a future Bishop of Jarrow, put their dilemma in *Papers From Picardy*: “Mr. God or M. Cinema — for which does the chaplain stand? Does the soldier think of his Padre in the main as the representative of God, or chiefly as the provider of canteens, cinemas, and creature comforts?”¹⁰⁴ Undoubtedly the latter, in many cases, as it was only due to a successful cinema show that Harry Blackburne was later honoured with an invitation to lead a service for the RNAS.¹⁰⁵ Significantly, and having created his travelling cinema, Dugdale sought to send it from squadron to squadron without him, pronouncing that “It is not good that these lads should look upon me merely as a Cinema Proprietor.” By this time, Dugdale was also preoccupied with the erection of a prefabricated Church Army hut at one of his airfields, a facility he likened to “a vast jigsaw puzzle.”¹⁰⁶ In February 1918, Leonard wrote that his typical week was consumed with visits, services, and organised sports.¹⁰⁷ Although these activities (which, in Leonard’s case, could even stretch to piggyback wrestling in the mess)¹⁰⁸ were much-

97. R. Overy, *The Birth of the RAF, 1918: The World’s First Air Force* (London: Penguin, 2018), 9.

98. Dugdale, 129.

99. Dugdale, 130, 132–33.

100. Dugdale, 129.

101. Leonard, 226.

102. Leonard, 181.

103. Dugdale, 130, 155.

104. T. Pym and G. Gordon, *Papers from Picardy* (London: Constable, 1917), 108.

105. Blackburne, 73.

106. Dugdale, 147.

107. Leonard, 191.

108. Leonard, 182–183.

needed distractions for the men which allowed relations with their chaplains to mature, they also reflected a moral and prudential concern, especially given the role of alcohol in the lives of young British aviators. As Leonard wrote after running a riotous game of “old English football,” “the great thing it seems to me is to give these young sparks something to do to fill in their spare time & keep them away from the firewater.”¹⁰⁹ In terms of strictly religious provision, it seems that logistical and operational considerations posed their greatest and most intractable problems. Sundays and feast days involved a great deal of travel and organisation, but the weather and operational needs often conspired to disrupt or postpone services.¹¹⁰ The ministry of Leonard and Dugdale was, therefore, one of small focussed efforts which had to be repeated constantly as squadrons moved on, or as they went the rounds of their improvised, aeronautical parishes. The model of ministry they developed was certainly challenging, for as lone workers and pioneers they had to draw upon their own resources for support and inspiration. As Leonard reflected: “The Padre really is a lonely sort of soul, despite his many pagan friends. He has to make and keep his own atmosphere, which is not always easy in the ultra-material world which war creates.”¹¹¹

As they served personnel who could suffer and die many miles from their airfields, Flying Corps chaplains often found themselves travelling long distances to visit those injured in crashes, or in attempts to retrieve and bury those killed behind friendly lines — “dashing over the country in a lorry for miles and miles,” as Dugdale put it.¹¹² On one occasion, Leonard had to recover a recently discovered corpse that was six months old.¹¹³ Significantly, the lifestyle led by fliers of the RFC seemed to heighten the emotional effect of such losses, a point noted by Leonard:

Somehow or other, this seems much more tragic than a casualty in the trenches. Here, a couple of fellows go out in the morning full of life and good spirits from comparative civilisation, white tablecloths, and toast and marmalade — and never come back. Up the line, everybody lives in an atmosphere of sudden death. It is almost a normal thing, and so death doesn't seem to be so terrible. But here we seem so far away from war that death begins to have all the vague horrors which it brings with it in peacetime.¹¹⁴

What elicited this reflection was a pilot jumping from a burning aircraft at 500 feet, his observer choosing to perish in the subsequent crash — described by Leonard as “a vertical nose-dive from 200 feet.”¹¹⁵ That such incidents frequently unfolded as public spectacles, watched and followed by those on the ground, accentuated the sense of shock and grief. Worse still was a case of suicide noted by Leonard in January 1918 — an observer

109. Leonard, 186.

110. Dugdale, 159, 173.

111. Leonard, 225.

112. Dugdale, 134.

113. Leonard, 196.

114. Leonard, 183.

115. Leonard, 183.

jumping from 500 feet: “he had been very strange for some time and had been drinking hard, and much resented my word of remonstrance a day or two before.”¹¹⁶ For his part, Dugdale confessed to be badly shaken by the death of eighteen-year-old Second Lieutenant Gerald Huddart Swann, “a perfectly sweet & adorable little boy,” shot down over no-man’s land after putting up “an awfully good show before he was killed.” Although very much a seasoned, front-line chaplain, Dugdale found it difficult to read the burial service and pronounced Swann’s death to be “the tragedy of tragedies” for the squadron concerned.¹¹⁷ Ironically, only a month earlier he had concluded a stoical reverie on the loss of a friend and chess partner with the reflection: “But war is war and that is all there is to be said about it.”¹¹⁸ The tradition, encouraged by Hugh Trenchard, the commander of the RFC in France, of never leaving an empty chair on a squadron and of constantly replenishing losses may have enabled units to “carry on,” but it may also have caused individuals to retreat into a realm of private grief.¹¹⁹ If fliers shared their burdens with the padre, their confidences — quite understandably — largely went unrecorded. In public at least, it was mess life, black humour, and living to fight another day that sustained them.

The chaplain, however, also had duties to civilians at home, and especially the bereaved. In July 1918, for example, and at a mother’s request, Leonard travelled a considerable distance to place a bouquet on the grave of a deceased flier.¹²⁰ At around the same time, he buried a new pilot who had been killed in an accident, his body “so badly smashed that we had to bury him where he fell.” This entailed erecting a cross carved from a broken propeller — by this time something of an RFC custom —¹²¹ and taking a photograph of the grave.¹²² More routine was the solemn duty of writing letters of condolence, such as that written by Padre P. H. Wilson to the mother of nineteen-year-old Second Lieutenant “Jack” Walthew of 4 Squadron RFC, who went missing near Ypres in September 1917. It concluded:

You would not have me raise false hopes I am sure. I only pray that he may somehow have escaped with his life. You will be glad to know that your son frequently made his Communion at the services I have held, & was always a regular attendant at the other services. Everyone in the squadron liked him immensely, and all are very sad that he is missing. He was carrying out his duty bravely at the time, & whatever has happened you may well be proud to have had such a son. May the Holy Spirit comfort you in your time of anxiety.¹²³

116. Leonard, 185.

117. Dugdale, 148.

118. Dugdale, 148.

119. Barker, 171; Jones, *King*, 91, 232.

120. Leonard, 222.

121. Cooksley, 177.

122. Leonard, 223.

123. Steel and Hart, *Tumult*, 301; <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/775892/walthew-john-syers/> (accessed 17 June 2020).

Unlike Dugdale and Leonard, Keymer left no extensive account of his ministry to the RFC. Nevertheless, details from many other sources point to another experienced chaplain immersed in his work, and to a demonstrable record of pastoral commitment and accomplishment. Posted to the RFC by Harry Blackburne in February 1917, Keymer thus became the Flying Corps' first dedicated chaplain, initially doing "wonderful work" by going "from Squadron to Squadron all over the Army Area."¹²⁴ Although chaplain to the whole of First Brigade RFC, most of our knowledge of Keymer's ministry relates to the Flying Corps' elite 40 Squadron at Bruay, which he appears to have made his base.¹²⁵ Here, he developed a stable, quasi-parochial ministry, an approach advertised by the construction of a chapel dedicated to St. Michael, victor of the Book of Revelation's "war in heaven" (Revelation 12: 7–10). Opened by Harry Blackburne in the spring of 1918, which suggests it was built to mark the formation of the RAF, Blackburne described it as "a lovely church ... R.A.F. colours everywhere, pictures of St. Michael, the Flying Warrior, and a cross made out of a broken propeller."¹²⁶ The RAF's first purpose-built chapel, its existence advertised that Keymer saw religion as integral to life in Britain's newly independent Air Force, and his determination to assert that. If such signalling was hardly subtle, Keymer's pastoral approach was far from ham-fisted and he seems to have nurtured a large number of genuine friendships, apparently dispensing much pastoral advice on the squadron's tennis court.¹²⁷ Mannock (a Roman Catholic by background, a socialist, and a Home Ruler)¹²⁸ had a conspicuously close friendship with Keymer, which may have reflected his awkward social standing as a working-class autodidact and — given his experience of a sottish and absentee father — a possible hankering for a stable father figure. Whatever the nature of his appeal, Adrian Smith has aptly described Keymer as Mannock's "early confidant and man-of-the-world father-confessor."¹²⁹ The two clearly saw plenty of each other — playing tennis, for example, and shopping for tobacco and treats for the mess.¹³⁰ Mannock also identified Keymer as the cause of his few days off in St. Omer in May 1917, leading to his surfeit of champagne: "Anyhow, the Padre advised me to go, as he thought it would do me good."¹³¹ Nor was theirs a one-way relationship, for Mannock once dissuaded Keymer from a quixotic plan to leave the Chaplains' Department to train as a pilot.¹³² After the war, Keymer wrote of Mannock:

124. Blackburne, 127.

125. Mackersey, 197.

126. Blackburne, 160.

127. A. Smith, *Mick Mannock, Fighter Pilot: Myth, Life, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 76.

128. History Ireland, <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/major-robert-gregory-and-the-irish-air-aces-of-1917-18/> (accessed 5 March 2018).

129. Smith, 154.

130. Oughton, 97, 113.

131. Oughton, 85, 111.

132. Smith, 76.

We were very great friends. He used to confide in me. After so many years, he remains a vivid memory, and quite the greatest personality that I met during the war. ... When he was inwardly sad and depressed, as I often knew he was, he never showed it in the mess, where he was usually boisterous and cheerful. Often he had to be thus in order not to give away his inward feelings. ... Of one thing I am certain. His soul rests peacefully in the bosom of our Lord, for there was no vileness in his soul and he always put his trust in Him.¹³³

Another pilot, Captain William Bond, admired Keymer's "good-nature and sincerity and quick repartee,"¹³⁴ noting with wry amusement his agonised restraint while conversing with an outrageously profane Canadian pilot.¹³⁵ And Keymer's informality was clearly emblematic of his ministry. On 23 December 1917, a new arrival to 40 Squadron wrote to his family: "I suppose there is no harm in having a bit of a fill-out on Christmas Day. Our padre says he sees no reason why everyone should not get thoroughly tight! He is a splendid fellow."¹³⁶ Bond also recorded how Keymer, whom he dubbed "the Odd Man," held a service in an anteroom of the squadron's mess, its walls adorned with louche portraits of young ladies, and its tables strewn with playing cards: "The Odd Man explained that he wanted to make it a meeting rather than a service; therefore after prayers and a few hymns he proposed we should smoke while he gave us an address. ... 'It stimulated thought,' he said."¹³⁷

As the prototype of the ideal RAF chaplain, Keymer was also highly creative in providing diversions for his flock: laying down a tennis court; constructing a ten-seater deckchair "made of rough timber and cocoanut matting"; publishing a squadron magazine; and, in collaboration with the commanding officer, arranging for a local stream to be blocked to create a squadron swimming pool.¹³⁸ Yet, when need arose, Keymer's informality, which extended to leading exuberant midnight bathing parties, did not detract from his watchfulness or gravitas. On the late return of a party of officers from a boisterous night out, Bond noted that "the Odd Man declared he must come next time ... whether to control or to join in the game was not quite clear."¹³⁹ Furthermore, he described Keymer's ministry on the flight line before, during, and after "a balloon strafe," remarking that "It is worth a good deal to see him at the aërodrome when any big stunt is going forward." In this instance, Keymer's solemn, silent presence as the aircraft departed for this particular operation — "He was fearfully grave. ... I don't think he expected any of us to return" — was succeeded by his jubilation upon their safe return — "'Oh, damn good!' He exclaimed. 'Damn good. ... Absolutely

133. Jones, 117–18.

134. A. Bond, *My Airman Over There* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918), 189.

135. Bond, 161–62.

136. G. H. Lewis, *Wings over the Somme, 1916–1918* (London: Kimber, 1976), 120.

137. Bond, 64.

138. Bond, 68, 88–89, 142, 188–89.

139. Bond, 109.

topping!”¹⁴⁰ Keymer also searched for missing pilots, finding one — who had preternaturally survived an anti-aircraft shell, a ground barrage, and a gas attack — in a casualty clearing station,¹⁴¹ and presided at a sobering litany of funerals. Like his colleagues attached to other units of the RFC, Keymer also wrote letters of condolence to relatives at home, and at times engaged in protracted correspondence with the bereaved, as was the case with Bond’s widow, Aimee, after he went missing in July 1917.¹⁴²

Such was Keymer’s local standing and reputation that, in 1917, he was among the select contributors to *The Church in the Furnace*, one of seventeen distinguished Anglican chaplains whose essays represented a wide-ranging manifesto for post-war church reform. Reflecting his background as Vicar of Eastleigh (a railway town); his previous stint as a curate of St. Mary’s, Portsea, a model industrial parish of the day;¹⁴³ his experience of skilled air mechanics; and even his friendship with Mannock, Keymer’s essay dealt with the subject of “Fellowship in Industrial Life.” This was a topic he had addressed in 40 Squadron, Bond noting that he had had a “topping discussion” with Keymer “before a large audience” on the subjects of “the war, the peace, Germany’s future position and our attitude to her, the Russian revolution, and then later, conscientious objections, industrial unrest and Socialism and Christianity.” Clearly no radical firebrand, Bond detected that Keymer had “the stereotyped ‘country gentleman’ attitude of his type toward political and sociological things” but was at least trying “to get outside these prejudices — and it must be difficult.”¹⁴⁴ Bond’s judgement was very much borne out by Keymer’s subsequent essay, which claimed that the war had dealt an irreparable blow to social prejudice and class hatreds, and concluded:

God, Who is ever striving to bring good out of evil, has allowed us to see in war a force which whilst it destroys men creates manhood, and He has opened the door to a wider fellowship, through which we must and shall pass, which leads to the happiness of the whole and therefore to His glory.¹⁴⁵

With the formation of the RAF on 1 April 1918, its existing chaplaincy arrangements (like its uniforms, logistics, and so much else)¹⁴⁶ remained essentially unchanged. Although a separate chaplaincy service for the RAF was sanctioned that October, Army responsibility for RAF chaplaincy in France and Belgium continued until New Year’s Day 1919, when it became the responsibility of the Air Ministry.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, in July 1918 Bishop Gwynne chaired an all-day conference of RAF chaplains, a gathering that

140. Bond, 64–65.

141. Bond, 114–15.

142. Bond, 243–45, 251, 256, 270.

143. C. F. Garbett, ed., *The Work of a Great Parish* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915).

144. Bond, 189–190.

145. B. W. Keymer, “Fellowship in Industrial Life,” in *The Church in the Furnace*, ed. F. B. McNutt (London: Macmillan, 1917), 144.

146. Overy, 50.

147. Museum of Army Chaplaincy, “R/ACHD Precedent Book.”

discussed every facet of their work, and which Leonard felt invigorated by. Nevertheless, he wistfully noted, “One day — but not during the war — we will sever our connection altogether with the Army and become pukka members of the RAF.”¹⁴⁸ For his part, Keymer’s standing as the RAF’s senior chaplain in France was a natural function of his pioneering ministry. Although his connection with Mannock (who was killed on 26 July 1918), with 40 Squadron, and with *The Church in the Furnace* no doubt boosted his standing with his peers, he continued to act as a role model for chaplains ministering to RAF squadrons. Clearly inspired by Keymer, Dugdale wrote of their meeting in November 1917: “[Keymer] is obviously a good fellow & is doing things in his Brigade which I couldn’t begin to do here ... he bucked me up quite a lot. One is up against it in the Flying Corps to an extraordinary degree: & the temptation is to live & let live & do nothing.”¹⁴⁹ Nearly a year later, Talbot enthused: “Keymer is going great guns now in the R.A.F. world out here — he has great gifts for it & will get a fine band of men round him — has got a good nucleus now.”¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Keymer was not to enjoy his wartime pre-eminence in the post-war Chaplains’ Branch, as it came to be called. Passed over for chaplain-in-chief in favour of a deskbound navy chaplain, Harry Dan Leigh Viener, who had no discernible experience of aviation, Keymer instead became chaplain to the new RAF College at Cranwell, an aeronautical seminary whose motto *Superna Petimus* (“We Seek the Highest”) he apparently coined.¹⁵¹

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the administrative twists, turns, and details that accompanied the creation of the Chaplains’ Branch in Great Britain. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that when the Under-Secretary of State to the Air Ministry, Major J.L. Baird, presented the House of Commons with the financial Estimates for the RAF on 21 February 1918, the Conservative MP for Brentwood, William Joynson-Hicks, promptly raised the issue of an independent chaplains’ service for the independent air force:

The House will agree with me, I think, not only that a Medical Service should be established, but that there should also be a Chaplains’ Service for this new force. We have chaplains in the Army and in the Navy, and I am quite sure one of the first things my hon. Friend will do as soon as he can will be to establish a Chaplains’ Service.¹⁵²

Joynson-Hicks was an aviation pundit and evangelical Anglican who would later earn notoriety (or celebrity) for his strident opposition to Prayer Book Reform in the late 1920s, and for being “the most prudish, puritanical, and protestant home secretary of the twentieth century.”¹⁵³ Despite his very

148. Leonard, 225.

149. Dugdale, 152.

150. Papers of Bishop Neville Talbot, DD 1332/146.

151. Lewis, 183.

152. [api.parliament.uk](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1918/feb/21/estimates-presented-by-major-baird), <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1918/feb/21/estimates-presented-by-major-baird>, 978–79 (accessed 19 June 2020).

153. F. M. L. Thompson, “William Joynson-Hicks,” *ODNB* (Oxford: OUP: 2010), <https://doi.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/33858>.

personal concern — but significantly for our purposes — the House clearly agreed with Joynson-Hicks that the RAF should have its own chaplains, and that these should be properly funded from the public purse. Although part of a much wider debate, not a single voice was raised to even question that assumption, and a month later the Air Council duly turned its attention to the knotty administrative problems of creating a Chaplains' Branch.¹⁵⁴

The origins, nature, and formal creation of the Chaplains' Branch raises reflections with which to conclude this study of the genesis of RAF chaplaincy. Firstly, if the conditions of the First World War threw up a plethora of new challenges for army and navy chaplaincy, these were at least well-established forms of ministry, with historic roots and accepted pastoral methods and precedents that could be adapted and applied to modern warfare. However, aviation chaplaincy, like aerial warfare, was entirely novel. And the dangers and stresses of the war in the air were extreme, even by the gruesome standards of the ground war. Nevertheless, and as a new type of warfare developed in the skies over Belgium and northern France, a specialised, innovative, and apparently effective form of chaplaincy was pioneered by Anglican chaplains in order to support the beleaguered fliers of the Royal Flying Corps. Whereas much of their ministry was improvised and experimental, as part of the operation of what can be conceived as the *de facto* Anglican diocese of the Western Front, after the 1916 Battle of the Somme a conspicuously capable and experienced cadre of Anglican chaplains was committed to a new, daunting, and semi-itinerant ministry that ultimately brought much-needed physical, emotional, and spiritual succour to hundreds of hard-pressed British fliers, "aces," and "Fokker fodder" alike. That the Church of England took the lead in this ministry is indicative not only of the considerable preponderance of Anglicans in Britain's armed forces but also demonstrates the basic competence and adaptability of Anglican military chaplaincy at this time — facets usually ignored by studies of Anglican chaplaincy in the First World War. Secondly, and despite the supposedly secularising shock of the war years, their ministry was plainly needed by British aviators and such was its importance, and the underlying resilience of religious conviction in British society, that in 1918 the creation of a new Chaplains' Branch for the Royal Air Force was accepted without demur by parliamentarians, the Air Ministry, the military authorities, the British churches, and the British public. Ironically, and given the technology involved in aerial warfare, and the supremely technical character of the RAF, all of this occurred just as Max Weber was developing and disseminating his influential theories on the inimical and ineluctable consequences of scientific and technological progress for religious belief. Clearly, such hypotheses were completely alien to the lived experience of the air war, as they were to the war in general. Whatever the causes and extent of secularisation in British society in the generations that followed, in this experience and broad

154. The National Archives, AIR 6/12, "21st Meeting of Air Council," 22 March 1918.

religious consensus lay the foundations of a new chaplaincy service that would extend pastoral support to hundreds of thousands of RAF personnel throughout the Second World War, through the Cold War, and into the twenty-first century.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.